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**Sustainable practices at academic workplace**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore the main academic processes that can be used to enhance sustainability performance and find out what are the sustainability practices that make good bottom-line academic sense. This study aims to increase knowledge on how the meanings of sustainability are collectively shaped and promoted.

**Design/ methodology** – This is a theoretical paper based on insight from both the literature and a practical insight. The research methodology is semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

**Findings** – The analysis of the interview data shows that academic staff in the School of Physical and Geographical Sciences at Keele University have a range of mutual and personal individual plans for pursuing sustainable development. These plans represent interactive relationships between sustainability forms and academic practices.

**Research implications** – This study uses theoretical framework and empirical research to explore the academic sustainable practices and sustainability challenges in higher education institutions. This paper provides an overview of the interactive relationships between three forms of sustainability (triple bottom line) and the three main activities of higher education institutions (learning and teaching, researching and operational practices).

## Introduction

Sustainability, as a contemporary research discipline, has increasingly gained devotion and concern from academics as well as business practitioners. But there are many theoretical and practical gaps left for further academic and empirical development. Addressing sustainability practices is vital for all of society, and specifically higher education institutions (HEIs) in order to develop competitive insights and skills for current and future generations.

Sustainability is now broadly considered as the most favourable framework within HEIs to promote social, environmental and economic prosperity (Ferrer-Balas, et al., 2010). Furthermore, in 2011 the UK government established the UK Green Investment Bank to support and develop sustainable projects in the UK economic sector including HEIs<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals Report (MDGs) has identified global major plans and strategies for sustainable development in 2013. These plans focus on establishing global partnership for development, ensuring environmental sustainability and implementing programmes to support sustainable education (United Nations, 2013). Thus, there is a growing consideration of the important role that HEIs and universities have to play in promoting the sustainability for all of society.

There are many explanations of sustainable practices, but the only broad framework of these practices was addressed in the 1987 Brundtland Report:

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<sup>1</sup>The GIB is part of a broader UK ambition to create a low-carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable ('green') economy. The GIB is one of several policy measures taken by the government to create a green UK economy. In 2011, the UK government committed the budget to fund the GIB with £3.8 billion over the period to 2015. GIB started to make direct, state aid compliant investments in green infrastructure projects from April 2013 (for more information see <http://www.bis.gov.uk/greeninvestmentbank>).

*“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”*

Given the absence of conceptual clarity surrounding these practices in the literature, the current study will help to clarify these academic practices to increase their operational and strategic merit in this sector. Thus, the main emphasis for this research is focused on building a robust and sustainable legacy for academic practices for university stakeholders e.g. current and future students, employees, local communities, business societies and social enterprises.

### **Research objectives**

This research paper explores sustainability practices and specifically, the practical issues of putting sustainability theory into practice at Keele University. It also provides an illuminating exercise to explain the role of Keele University, as a higher education institution, in creating a more sustainable environment for the wider community as well as its own stakeholders.

Currently, there is an expanding shortage of scholarly researches to explore the sustainable academic practices (SAP) in UK Universities in order to ensure a sustainable future for all of society. SAP, as a contemporary promising discipline, has become one of the recent research fields in social and environmental sciences (Spence & Gray, 2007). Furthermore, this research will clarify the relationships among economy, environment, and social influence of the university activities in order to engage the general stakeholders and raising sustainability awareness.

Higher education sector represents the main supplier of future business developers and entrepreneurs as well as being institutional investors in sustainability (Lozano, et al., 2013).

The evidence in the paper was collected using semi structured in-depth interviews with seven academic scholars from the School of Physical and Geographical Sciences (SPGS), Keele University as a case study. The analysis was performed against three dimensions / sets of academic sustainable practices. These dimensions can be summarized into three main categories: educational, research and operational practices.

### **Core argument**

Given the current structure of triple bottom line approach (TBL) and sustainability motivations, sustainable development (SD) is continuing to evolve within some industrial sectors e.g. health and public service; manufacturing; energy supply; retail and commercial enterprise; banking and financial services; and HEIs (Unerman, et al., 2007; McElroy & Engelen, 2012; Hopwood, et al., 2010 and Jeucken 2004).

Thus, SD framework is now based upon the achievement of three different sustainability components: economic, social and environmental sustainability. The future development of these components in higher educational institutions will be focused on exploring more useful and sophisticated theoretical lenses to address sustainability practices in organizational setting (Unerman, et al., 2007). However, there are potential degrees of convergence between these components (i.e., TBL) and the three dimensions of the academic sustainable practices.

Climate changes, the global financial crisis, reformed legal frameworks and economic pressures on business enterprises have widely added new dimensions of the accountability profession (Hopwood, et al., 2010). Therefore, there is a great motivation towards promoting and exploring SD practices in the institutional context. These motivations are further supported by an extensive increase in sustainability initiatives proposed by global international organizations e.g. United Nations (UN) and Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), Sustainability Context Group in USA and some governmental authorities e.g. UK Green Investment Bank.

Currently, there is an expanding shortage of sustainability research to explore the institutional SD practices in the HEIs in order to assess the influence of these practices on current and future generations. SD, as a contemporary discipline has become one of the latest research fields in social and environmental sciences, particularly in HEIs, as one of the most important engine or network for sustainable future (Lozano, et al., 2013).

### **Theoretical positioning**

This research was prompted by the development of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and triple bottom line approach. These theories have been used broadly, but not extensively, to explain the institutional context of sustainability (see McElroy & Engelen, 2012; Ian Thomson in Unerman et al., 2007; Chen & Roberts, 2010; and Bebbington, et al., 2005).

However, in order to develop more sustainable practices, business institutions have managed not only economic capital, but also their natural capital and social capital (McElroy & Engelen, 2012). To enable this insight to move

forward, the concept has highlighted the need for concise and clear strategies for environmental, social and economic sustainability. It also sets up the challenge to harvest valuable benefits not only from the use of green technology but also the impact from a learning and business perspective (Spence & Gray, 2007). It should be noted that there are some theoretical and practical gaps left for further academic and empirical development. Some of these gaps could be identified in investigating the interactive relationships between three forms of sustainability (TBL) and the three main activities of HEIs (learning and teaching, researching and operational practices).

Lasano et al, (2013) argued two main aspects to develop the maturation of SD in the HEIs: (1) the need to develop the university system e.g. including curricula development, research, physical operations and the engagement with stakeholders; and (2) the assessment and reporting. But this work does not clarify the action plans that should be introduced by the HEIs leaders to promote this initiative for current and future generations. In addition, they do not indicate the conceptual framework of this new paradigm to catalyse SD throughout the entire university.

Furthermore, the main behavioural changes and the critical position of the HEIs to accelerate their role to create more sustainable societies should be embedded in the academic workplace (Ferrer-Balas, et al., 2010). These changes need to focus on creating more sophisticated social rafts e.g. values, attitudes, motivations, societal interactions and the assessments of the social impacts of academic research in order to empower this role. Ferrer-Balas, et al., (2010) argued for a structured framework to systematize change for sustainability in higher education. Furthermore, they claim that there is a need



for creating interactive partnerships with practitioners and integrating leadership with cultural aspects to promote SD. The participatory approach to change the cultural values within universities can be criticized by a lack of practical and institutional responsibility in creating these norms to facilitate the development and sharing of new sustainable practices. Operational and institutional facilities should also be marshalled to reinforce this desirable change.

More prominently, HEIs could learn from the efforts of corporate sustainability experience to develop their own sustainable practices (Lozano, 2011). This process could be used as well to develop the sustainability reporting mechanism in order to strengthen the societal business links and communicate effectively with stakeholders e.g. UK Higher Education Academy (HEA), current and prospective students, academic and administrative staff, financial institutions, alumni, student unions and business enterprises. Furthermore, this mechanism could be applied in the other direction to promote the reputational legitimacy of HEIs.

The institutional level of stakeholder theory outlines the achievements of the organisational objectives of corporate strategies (Mansell, 2013). The achievement of these objectives should include some sort of managerial responsibility to align the corporate objectives with the interests of stakeholders. But stakeholder identification represents a debatable challenge for institutional leaders and managers in order to articulate fundamental bases of legitimacy in stakeholder-manager relationships (Mitchell, et al., 1997). Mansell (2013) argues that whilst some stakeholders hold legitimate influence on managers and institutions, this influence does not articulate the nature of

these relationships. Furthermore, Mitchell, et al., (1997) introduce some theoretical progress toward corporate social responsiveness, asserting the importance of exploring the main stakeholders and defining the source of their influence on the organization. However, it does not explore practical techniques that could be used to identify those stakeholders or offer a solution as to how to build up successful business links with them.

The institutional reputation represents an important factor that could be used to develop these links (Bebbington, et al., 2008). Legitimacy theory suggests the possibility of using social and environmental reporting in order to strengthen the institutional reputations in order fulfil the anticipated expectations of the main stakeholders (Unerman, 2008).

In addition, TBL approaches could be used as crucial ideas to stimulate institutional reputations. The three element of the institution's economic, environmental and social impact represent insufficient conditions to achieve the comprehensive objectives of SD (Milne & Gray, 2012). The main reasons behind this insufficiency are captured in the conflict between institutional desire to secure more profits (for financial viability) at the expense of social and environmental equity. However, McElroy & Engelen (2012) do not accept these claims because they do not provide any alternative routes to achieve institutional sustainable practices and develop more ecological society. Moreover, they have used a TBL approach to measure the institutional sustainability performance.

Finally, stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and TBL approaches represent a useful context to develop institutional sustainable practices and create more

positive green impact for current and future generations. This conceptual framework could be used as a starting point to measure sustainability performance for academic activities. It should be noted that whilst a TBL approach does not offer many practical insights, it is still a valid approach for more longitudinal and/or empirical investigations.

### **Method applied**

In order to support the conceptual framework and address academic sustainable practices, an interpretative approach was adopted as a qualitative research method of choice. The evidence from this study was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven academic staff from the School of Physical and Geographical Sciences at Keele University, as a case study. The interviews ranged from one to one and a half hours in duration and were guided by a number of general open ended questions. The main purpose of the research interviews was to explore how meanings of sustainability are shaped and promoted collectively in the academic work place (Fontanna & Frey, 2008). This approach was developed in order to address the main research objectives (Silverman, 2010). There were three main reasons for selecting academic staff from this school. First, some interviewees have had some input into formulation of ideas about sustainability at Keele University. Second, academic staff at this school could be expected to have broad perspectives on sustainability activities and may thus be viewed as being able to address questions investigating the perception of academic sustainable practices. Third, the majority of interviewees had broad expertise from areas of clean technology, physical and geographical sciences, and sustainable

education. Additionally, some of the interviewees were teaching comprehensive courses on Greening Business, Employability, and Sustainability for foundation and first year students. Further, this school participated in a three year research project funded by the Higher Education Academy's National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, entitled Hybrid problem-based learning – a scalable approach to sustainability education, a collaboration between Keele, Manchester, and Staffordshire Universities that aimed to explore, develop, and disseminate novel pedagogies and educational resources for sustainability education within universities based on problem-based learning (PBL)<sup>2</sup>.

The interview questions were focused on a limited number of points, centring on social, environmental and economic aspects of sustainability in the academic practices. The on-going analysis was supported by notes taken during and after each interview to reflect on emerging themes and provide general feedback about research structure e.g. sustainability process (Silverman, 2010), thereby helped clarify any emerging contradictions in the core themes.

## **Findings**

During the interviews, it was apparent that academic staff perceived sustainable practices as a competitive advantage for the university. This perception was used to classify and address academic sustainability practices and forms (see table I). However, further sustainable practices were suggested by some interviewees based on their own long experience in the

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<sup>2</sup> To find out more about the project please have a look at <http://www.keele.ac.uk/hybridpbl/> (accessed at 27Th February 2013)

UK higher education sector. Therefore, while academic sustainable practices were perceived as being part of their jobs, its existence in their work place was ultimately viewed as a supplementary and personal commitment. In conjunction with this insight, the sustainability forms have been classified into three main categories; economic, social and environmental context.

		Sustainability forms		
		Economic	Social	Environmental
Academic practices	Learning & teaching (L&T)	New courses & curriculum in SD	New sustainability norms, values and attitudes	Online materials and marking
	Researching	Developing research/ business links with sustainability leaders	Encouraging SD research activities	Assessing the impact of REF research activities
	Operational	Fair trade suppliers	Marketing	Greener campus activities
	Others	Business enterprise and auditing of quality assurance activities	Developing sustainability awareness in the local communities	Developing social and environmental reporting based on successful corporate experience

Table I the relationships between TBL and academic practices

### **Economic sustainability**

Some interviewees stressed that they had to cope with economic pressures to down size the operational costs and developing the existing structure of current courses to offer quality learning experience(s) for prospective students. The main purpose of this development was concentrated on improving students experience and knowledge for lifelong learning. In addition, they suggested some fundamental changes in research activities. These changes focused on assessing the social and environmental impact for the university research outputs rather than the Research Excellence Framework (REF). More importantly, they argued the purposes of the internal

quality assurance framework (IQAF) as a proxy for institutional development. They suggested greater emphasis on the validity and criticism of this audit process. The main weaknesses of IQAF stemmed from the absence of an expected economic return from these activities as well as the national benchmark for the whole process. These concerns are consistent with sustainability challenges and other claims in the higher education sector (see Ferrer-Balas, et al., 2010). Two interviewees conversed in broad terms regarding their professional responsibilities for the future, particularly those researching and teaching environmental subjects. These participants were placing sustainable development at the core of their work e.g. teaching, researching and governance. The main purpose of this initiative is to integrated sustainable practices into day to day activities and procedures, but as yet, this process does not include a clear institutional role to raise awareness and understanding of sustainability issues for the whole university. The sustainability initiative, undertaken by the university, does not have a working strategy or action plan with a specific enough range of key stakeholders to promote sustainable development across the whole university. Three interviewees described their own experiences in promoting sustainable development by introducing interdisciplinary teaching in the field of sustainability. The main benefits of these approaches were focused on creating multiple perspectives in knowledge for the current generations. In addition, this was thought to help current students to understand the complex nature of sustainability challenges and contests and how to create competitive opportunities.

### **Social sustainability**

The interview data shows that the perspective of social sustainability focuses on providing structure for stakeholders to create fundamental changes that have a big impact on society. This implies creating favourable values, attitudes and norms for sustainable development and this process aims to build up a new institutional philosophy between the university staff and key stakeholders. However, the missing issue was how to find a common framework to engage all of these parties in this way and requires a clear identification of the university strategic direction toward sustainable development.

The interviewees suggested some research schemes to support sustainable practices in the university, incorporating empirical sustainable research in curriculum development, lifelong education, green learning and teaching technology, learning communities and individual wellbeing. The main positive reflection of this ingenuity is centred on developing new individual initiatives which will promote and apply sustainable development via different point of views from different researchers.

The interview data also shows a noteworthy emphasis on developing sustainability awareness in the local communities. Some interviewees explored ideas to increase practical experience for staff and students, bring the research and teaching practices alive with practical applications of theories. The main motivation of this kind of suggestions is how to identify a common agenda to develop business links between the university and successful business leaders in the field of sustainable development.

### **Environmental sustainability**

Academic staffs working in environmental subjects were initially more forthcoming about their motivations for sustainable development, having been influenced to variable degrees of depths and consistency by their own experiences in the field. They suggested some operational techniques to reduce the negative impact of the university process e.g. applying online reading materials, using renewable energy sources to reduce Carbon footprint, developing the environmental reporting process and assessing the environmental impact of research activities and publications. They also postulated that the main challenge of using renewable energy resources was to measure the cost benefits analysis of these activities to create positive value added in the future, requiring a reliable accounting and information system to manage this process effectively based on the successful corporate experience in the field. Measuring the environmental impact of research outputs represents a crucial process, having been used as an institutional proposition to support the university reputation (see Unerman, 2008). It seems likely that a university would be seeking to use its research publications to support and build up a new form of legitimacy with the key stakeholders. This could be achieved by explaining how well the university has maintained its activities for promote sustainable development for current and future generations.

More significantly, some other interviewees asserted that the ethical image of the university in society could be used as a competitive advantage in the longer term, pointing out that the strengths of ethical responsibility of the university should be flagged to reflect the institutional commitment toward



sustainable development. The main challenge to this view is how ethical commitment could convince stakeholders that they were supporting the university (see Lozano et al., 2011).

### **Concluding thoughts**

The interview data discussed here shows need for a clear and on-going action and procedure towards maintaining and encouraging academic sustainable practices in the university. This allows more focus for institutional development and improvement toward sustainable development. In the academic workplace under study, the author found that sustainable practices could be used as a competitive advantage to achieve future institutional growth. As interviews data suggests, sustainable development is a societal collaboration or contract, representing a real facet or framework to create more positive impact and to create additional sources of excellence.

One of the main contributions of this research paper is to facilitate institutional dialogue between the university and the key stakeholders. The identified channels of this communication will potentially offer influential insights to develop the universities on-going strategies toward a more sustainable future. Another benefit of this research was to identify and explore some of the more practical lenses for decision makers. For example, academic sustainable practices could give us a wide strength of thoughts to pursue our institutional vision and confidence to create an ecological realm. Thus, the current challenges will be concentrated on how to manage university resources to achieve genuine prosperity for current and future generations.

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